

A Reflection

Dustin Saldarriaga, 2007 ETA

Between April and July 2007, I worked at a public elementary school in Salto, Uruguay, called La Amarilla. The school's name comes from the surrounding neighborhood, which itself reveals much about the nature of the school and its students. Traveling to La Amarilla from downtown Salto, paved roads eventually give way to dirt ones (which turn almost completely to mud during rainstorms) that bump along toward the school. Lining these roads are homes that belong to some of Salto's most destitute residents—homes frequently constructed of no more than a few sheets of wood or metal. Gradually, as one nears the school, outhouses appear alone, without a home serving as their counterpart.

These outhouses sometimes serve as homes for entire families—families such as that of a kindergarten student who attends La Amarilla. Within this poverty-stricken area, La Amarilla functions as a kind of oasis for many children, providing food, love, and a quality education to its students. It is important to note that not all of the students at La Amarilla live in this area, and not all share a background of socioeconomic disadvantage. Indeed, one of the school's largest strengths is that it effectively incorporates all of its students, in spite of their background and adversities. During my four months working at La Amarilla, I came to see the school as an ideal example of what a single school can achieve with committed, loving teachers. Upon entering the school, one is immediately greeted by smiling, genuinely happy children, with few exceptions. Indeed, it is sometimes easy to forget that many of these children are subjected to the poor living conditions that reside outside the school. Occasionally, however, the effects of socioeconomic adversities on these children become apparent; during the final weekly meal on Friday, many students consume three to four servings, only to arrive famished on Monday morning. I repeatedly heard stories of students being verbally and physically abused by parents and other relatives in their homes. Aspects of the reality that faced many of the students became apparent in various ways—through their unwashed tunics, deteriorating teeth, and, frequently, their behavior. By providing consistent love and support to their students, the teachers at La Amarilla created a school that would be more appropriately described as a family. Teachers genuinely care about their students—they are intimately familiar with the students' medical, psychological, and familial history; they provide students with the best food the school can afford (oftentimes roasted chicken catered from the city); and they invest in their own education in order to better teach their students. My mentor, Soledad, exemplified this fact—her experiences while in the United States on a fellowship were constantly present in her classroom. Within the first few minutes of my arrival at La Amarilla, Soledad's students shared a posterboard with images of their penpals in the United States. The students knew all the details about their friends living a hemisphere away—their names, hobbies, and even what their classes are like. Soledad's passion and talent for teaching only became more apparent with time, especially through the impressive language ability of her students. Monica Barreiro, a first-grade Spanish teacher, exemplified the presence of love at La Amarilla. Her relationship with her students was more similar to the relationship between a mother and her children. I saw her dance with them, laugh with them, and even cry with them. They never hesitated to show their affection for her with a hug, a kiss, or a smile. Guiding the school was Olga, a woman who has found an ideal balance between caring and discipline. The manner in which Olga fosters a familial environment at her school is enhanced by the fact that, unlike many school headmistresses who are either too lax or too strict, Olga disciplines with the care of a parent. As a result, students seem to respond to her out of respect rather than fear. Olga also effectively manages her coworkers in a way that also fosters respect. Thanks to Olga, I learned the invaluable role respect must play in not only teaching, but in any position of management. Personally, working at La Amarilla was a blessing, because it allowed me to work closely with the group of people that I most eagerly want to serve: the socially and economically disadvantaged. At La Amarilla I saw, firsthand, the possibility—and the value—of instilling respect, pride, and knowledge into children who society can oftentimes overlook. This is one of the primary aims in my life, and I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have worked toward this aim with my family at La Amarilla.